

# RELIGIOUS CULTS TODAY AND SALVATION\*

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of new religious cults is so widespread today, that it can and should be considered as a significant element of contemporary culture.<sup>(1)</sup> What renders these cults so attractive to many people today, especially youngsters, is substantially the same as that which has been offered for twenty centuries by Christianity, namely salvation and self-fulfilment. And yet many people join these cults after having been members of one or other of the Christian Churches.

What are then really these cults? What are their characteristics? What should our attitude towards them be? In this paper I shall try to answer these three questions, relying mostly on the research of scholars and theologians during the last decades or so.<sup>(2)</sup>

## 1. What are the new religious cults?

For more than a decade Western society, in particular the United States, Britain and West Germany, has seen the rise and proliferation of religious and spiritual groups which the general public has indiscriminately labeled as “cults”.<sup>(3)</sup> Many of the adherents of these new groups have come from the background of the traditional Christian Churches. By abandoning the beliefs and practices of their forefathers, they have passed a negative judgement on their Church and its relevance to contemporary life.

These so-called cults have often been in the public eye because of legal actions instituted by anguished parents whose sons or daughters have become cult members and left their homes, or because of legal investigations instigated by anticult persons and organizations. The very mention of “cults” stirs up concern and worry among certain strata of society. The

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1. Cf. G. Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Wilmington, McGrath, 1978); C. Glock and R. Bellah, Edit., *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif., 1976), 205 – 44.
2. Cf. e.g. K. Boa, *Cults, World Religions and You* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1979); R. Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing and the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); John A. Saliba, S.J., “The Christian Church and the New Religious Movements: Towards Theological Understanding”, *Theological Studies* 43, n.3 (1982) 468 – 485; same author, *Religious Cults Today: A Challenge to Christian Families* (Liguori Publ., Liguori. Mo.: 1983).
3. Cf. Saliba, *Religious Cults Today*, pp.7 ff.

terrifying vision of Jonestown in Guiana looms large in the minds of many. Fear bordering on paranoia is aroused whenever the public is informed of danger from these new groups by the news media.

And yet a decade of popular reaction and, as Saliba points out, of legal actions against these cults has not left us with a balanced picture of the new religious movements nor with a viable and theologically based Christian response to them. We still seem to fail to see them as opportunities for self-examination and for Christianity's ministry, we still persist in seeing them only as threats to Christianity's existence.<sup>(4)</sup> Far from eliminating these cults, such negative measures have more often than not given them new life and vigour.

What are then these cults? A cult is not the same thing as a sect. There have been sects of some kind or other since time immemorial. Sects usually emerge when a group of people withdraw from an established Church or religious community and claim that they represent a purer form of the tradition from which they split and an exclusive knowledge of truth. They too have an elaborate ritual for initiating their members into their community, but on the other hand they seldom borrow from other religious traditions and reject any attempt to introduce foreign beliefs and practices into their religious system. Sociologists have argued that over a period of time some sects become "denominations" (which is another word for "established" or "respectable" sect) and acquire a less alienated view of society and a more structured form of government. This more lenient attitude naturally enhances their chances of survival. The *Mormons*, the *Christian Scientists* and the *Seventh Day Adventists* are typical examples of sects.<sup>(5)</sup>

The origin of a cult is somewhat different. A charismatic leader appears and starts to preach a new synthesis of a religious tradition, a new interpretation of older religious ideals, or a new revelation of religious truths. The leader or founder of a cult recruits adherents from all denominations and Churches. Stress on authority, communal living and supernatural attitudes are distinctive traits of a cult. These groups are more inclined to stress the need for experiencing the divine than to encourage involvement in social reforms. Like sects, cults reject some, if not all, aspects of the current social order and create a secretive initiation rite to emphasize the total break with the past which the new member is expected to make.

Cults, unlike sects, are more tolerant of other belief systems, even though they maintain that their newly discovered religious system is more fulfilling, more satisfying, and more conducive to salvation and self-realization. Both cults and sects embark on strenuous missionary endeavor. Such zeal for converts, which often rightly arouses the indignation of the

4. Cf. Saliba, *ibid.*, p. 8.

5. Cf. *loc cit.*

public, is necessary for them if the cult is to grow and establish a base for self-propagation.<sup>(6)</sup>

It is important to note, as Saliba himself remarks, that many cult members do not find in their group a permanent or lasting community. The set of beliefs they share is relatively limited, and the level of commitment of many members may be much lower than it seems. The cult cannot survive in the shape in which it was born, and its belief system contains too much variety to create a homogeneous subcultural group.<sup>(7)</sup>

The above characteristics of cult and sect cannot be indiscriminately applied to all of the new religious movements. The differences between them are at times substantial. Thus, several of the cults are new: the *Christ Family* and the *Church of Bible Understanding* are typical examples of cults, and so are the *Jehovah's Witnesses* and the *Bahai's*. The *Unification Church*, more commonly known as the *Moonies*, can also be considered as a cult. Some of the eastern cults have a long history behind them, even though their spread throughout the Western world is relatively recent. Thus *Zen* is an ancient form of Japanese Buddhism, and the *Hare Krishnas* represent a well-established Hindu sect.

The level of cohesiveness within the new movements varies considerably. Those which promote community living, in ashrams or farms, have developed an authoritarian social structure very different from that of those who, like the members of *Transcendental Meditation*, can be left to their own devices once they are initiated.

Theologically also, the cults exhibit a bewildering diversity. While they all claim some kind of revelation and insist that they have the truth which brings salvation and happiness to the human race, their dogmatic assumptions, degrees of adherence to scriptural authority (whether it be the Bible or their own specific literature), and moral systems cover the spectrum from rigid conservatism to unrestricted liberalism. Then, too, some groups stick fairly rigidly to one tradition, be it Christian, Buddhist or Hindu, while others selectively combine Western and Eastern religious views.

It would seem justified, therefore, to refer to the proliferation of today's cults as a phenomenon, and a rather complex one at that. The complexity of the matter is even more evident when one considers the history of cults both in Western society and throughout the world. Cults have appeared in the course of the histories of both Western and Eastern civilizations. Over the last hundred years many Third World countries have witnessed the rise and spread of new religious movements, and in the United States there have been periods of cult activity in the second half of the last century and again in the 1920s.<sup>(8)</sup>

The history of cults is instructive, because it clearly demonstrates that the current public reaction to the new movements is not without precedent.

6. See Enroth, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 ff.; Saliba, *ibid.*, p. 9.

7. Cf. Saliba, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

8. Cf. Melton, *op. cit.*; Saliba, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

New religious groups have also in the past been treated with suspicion and even with persecution, the Mormons being a case in point. It would then be naive to look upon a cult or one of the new movements as a modern-day curse thriving on brainwashing techniques, or as a sign of satanic influence pointing to the imminent end of the world. The rise of cults is, and has been, in large part due to alienation and discontent with current religious and cultural conditions. Cults are also linked to social and religious changes. Understanding these conditions and changes is necessary in order to grasp the significance of the new religious movements and to devise a constructive response. Simply to denounce them will not lead to their decline. Any attempt to wipe them out by legal or coercive means could only produce partial success.

## 2. What are their characteristics?

To further identify these cults and understand their methods and objectives, we consider it useful to examine more in detail their main characteristics. These have been studied by a number of scholars and theologians,<sup>9)</sup> and what follows is a brief synopsis of some of them:

### a) *Enthusiasm*

A feature common to many of the new cults is the enthusiasm of their members, whose missionary zeal, though at times perplexing and disturbing, has an appealing and almost irresistible quality about it. Such fervour tends to suggest that cult members are involved in a worthwhile and noble cause. In an age when religious enthusiasms seem to be on the wane, the sight of young people proclaiming a new prophet and a somewhat original message draws attention and invites for careful reflection. However, when enthusiasm degenerates into fanaticism, and zeal becomes rabid zealotry, it appears to be more akin to compulsive behaviour.

Still, enthusiasm is a good quality if kept within bounds. Christianity would hardly have become a world religion without the untiring enthusiasm and the courageous zeal of the apostles and disciples of Jesus. Over the centuries countless Christians have exhibited their religious fervour in many exceptional ways, some of which may not be appealing to us today. The preachers of the Crusaders had to fire up their followers with enthusiastic appeals, and missionaries have shown extraordinary zeal in preaching the Gospel. But what is basic to Christianity is a quiet form of enthusiasm, which shows determination and not compulsion. Ways have to be found of making the young aware of this, rather than allowing them to go off looking for an Indian guru.

9. See W. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974); John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960); Saliba, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–29.

### b) *Dedication and Commitment*

One of the most noted characteristics of the new cults and religious movements is their stress on dedication and wholehearted commitment; and one is in fact immediately struck by this as soon as one comes in contact with their adherents for the first time.

It should perhaps not surprise us that people are prepared to do so much for their religious goals. After all, scientists and explorers have undergone endless toil and risked their lives for the advancement of human knowledge. Solid religion thrives on the dedication of its members. The martyrs certainly offer ample precedent of complete dedication and commitment to their beliefs.

Dedication and commitment, however, are in need of reflection and direction. Full dedication and unquestioning commitment, given spontaneously and almost on the spur of the moment, may be quite superficial. Serious commitment requires some trial period, a questioning phase and a time of evaluation. This does not seem to be the case with many of the contemporaneous religious movements.

Besides, the kind of dedication and commitment demanded by these cults seems to be destructive of one's personality, of one's moral and intellectual freedom, of one's identity. Such criticism is not without foundation. One cannot help wondering, therefore, why it is that many young people today decide to join such religious groups, when they are so sensitive to anything that might even seem to infringe on their freedom and curtail their personality. They could very well direct their commitment to the channels already provided by the religious tradition of their parents. Christianity does provide for the possibility of different levels of commitment within its fold, such as missionary work, membership in religious institutes and lay organizations, and the like. Christians have viewed these special commitments as responses to a divine call of some kind, which has to be tested and explored and finally accepted.

### c) *Emphasis on experience*

Another important characteristic of the new cults is their stress on religious experience. Religion is not just an intellectual exercise or a set of regulations, but it primarily involves a truly unique experience which can only be described as spiritual. God's presence, or "the divine", "the sacred", can be felt in a very special and personal way. They say implicitly: "I know God now not because my parents, my religious teachers, my pastors have told me about him, but because I have experienced him myself".

It is possible that some people who have joined the cults have experienced a genuine religious conversion. Theology finds nothing against that. Religion, after all, is not the end, but a means to the end. Psychologists and social scientists, however, have preferred to explain such experiences in psychological or sociological rather than in theological terms.

Whatever that may be, it remains true that even religious experience

cannot be the ultimate criterion of truth. It too must be submitted to a critical appraisal. The conflicting views and religious beliefs offered by some of the new cults cannot be all correct. The contradictory recipes for salvation preached by the roving gurus lead to nothing but confusion.

Furthermore, personal experience of the divine can be deceptive or hallucinatory. Drugs are known to impart similar experiences. Experience requires reflection. There is reason for concern when a religious group idealizes experience and channels it in a controlled direction without teaching its members to reflect upon it and to analyze it. True, the average Christian probably looks upon his or her religion mainly as a list of truths to which intellectual assent is demanded, and as a prescribed set of actions that are supposed to be followed. But this need not be so. The Church also teaches that Jesus is not merely a historical person who came to save us, but also a living reality with whom one can come into contact. The Christian Sacraments, rightly understood, are encounters with Christ, opportunities for true religious experiences enriching one's faith and enhancing one's spiritual growth.

#### d) *Meditation and Contemplation*

One of the features of the new religious cults which has attracted much attention is the practice of meditation and contemplation. The literature on these topics is voluminous.<sup>(10)</sup> Eastern cults have stressed especially the calming effects these ancient religious practices have on the human mind and on the personality as a whole. It should not surprise one if methods of calming the mind and slowing human activity are attractive in a cultural setting in which everything appears to be moving too fast and which does not allow much time for solitary reflection.

The problem, however, with the techniques adopted by many of these cults is that they easily become sheer mental exercises with little religious content or meaning. They can also be subtle forms of self-hypnosis, especially if indulged in for long periods of time. Contemplation, like meditation, can also be a means of escaping from reality, and those involved in such practices could be doing so to avoid personal problems rather than solving them.

On the other hand we must admit that meditation and contemplation as such are central to Christian spirituality, which has been throughout rich in mystical tradition. Ignorance of this fact explains why some of the ex-Christian adherents of these cults have found the guru's meditation original, exciting and rewarding.

#### e) *Training in spiritual disciplines and techniques*

Gurus, preachers and evangelists not only promise their followers peace of mind, inner tranquillity and some form of salvation, but they also offer means by which cult members can fulfil these felt needs. Besides the

10. Cf. Saliba, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

general practices of meditation and contemplation, the new cults prescribe or suggest to their adherents other technical and practical ways of overcoming their personal problems. Yoga, Zen, chanting, forms of community living are presented to them as empirical means for self-realization, or as ways leading to God, or more generally for salvation. These techniques are not to be outright rejected as false or deceptive.

We do not believe, of course, that all religions are the same in the sense that they propose equally effective paths to salvation. But it is legitimate to think that different religious practices from different religious traditions can be helpful in the human quest for self-fulfilment and for spiritual growth as well as for salvation in the Christian sense.

But there is reason for concern not in the exercises themselves, but in the theoretical and mental approach one takes to them. Several Eastern methods have a long history and have been tested rigorously within their own tradition, but can degenerate into routine acts performed mechanically to achieve a desired goal, being sometimes nothing but introverted actions ignoring a personal God.

But here again, spiritual disciplines and techniques have always had a place in the life of the Christian community. Fasting, penances and other ascetical acts aimed at self-control and facilitating one's way to God have been traditional Christian practices. One need only examine the lives of Christian Saints to see how integral to Christianity these exercises are. Many Christians have even adopted some of the practices used by the cults and given them an identifiable Christian flavour, and the terms "Christian Yoga" and "Christian Zen" have become acceptable terms in Christian spirituality.

#### f) *Intransigent Dogmatism*

Many adherents of the new religious cults seem to assume that they now have the answers to all religious and spiritual questions. To those whose previous religious affiliation was nominal or simply nonexistent, the cult can offer a social and psychological haven, accompanied by a sense of relief and security. It should however be borne in mind that a rigid form of dogmatism is not a new phenomenon brought about by the cults. It is an attitude inculcated by several past and present Christian Churches and groups. The Catholic Church herself has often been accused of this.

Religious certitude is a desirable goal, and there are important questions about human life which cannot be left unanswered. The problem, however, lies rather with the insistence that all questions have been comprehensively solved, and with the consequent downgrading of everybody else's beliefs.

This intransigent dogmatic attitude is a rather negative characteristic of many of the new religious cults of today, creating much antagonism and misunderstanding. It does not promote cooperation, but rather needlessly divides people. It often closes the door to dialogue and can be the cause for deep concern.

g) *Scripture Parroting*

Equally repulsive is the attitude assumed by members of several religious cults towards their sacred scriptures or religious writings. The claim that these writings have all the answers to social, psychological and scientific questions is often openly made. An extreme example of this is the claim of certain flying-saucer cults that their beliefs are based on the Bible. They argue that the story of Elijah's going up to heaven in a chariot (2 Kings 2, 9 – 11) is an obvious reference to the fact that flying saucers will eventually be sent by God to take us to our heavenly home.

It goes without saying, at least for us in any case, that the attempt to find in the Scriptures ready-made answers to all questions can in the long run be damaging to religion itself. The impressions that have led to accusations of indoctrination and brainwashing against the cults are partially created by such an attitude. Many of their adherents frequently quote their respective Scripture or sacred literature like parrots. They, of course, know them by heart, and can only explain them by just repeating them many times over.

h) *Religious elitism and exclusivism*

The insistence by a religious group that it alone possesses the truth, or that it is the sole depository of revealed knowledge, encourages a certain elitism among its members. The new converts are convinced that their religious involvement and experience give them an edge over all others. At times dire condemnations are issued against all other religions. This sense of superiority often develops into arrogance and is very difficult to deal with. It leads also to intolerance of other beliefs and postulates divine favouritism, which is theologically questionable, to say the least.

Exclusivism can very easily be the logical result of elitism. Members of the cults are directly or indirectly encouraged, at times even obliged, to cut their ties with their friends and families. Social contacts are restricted to the members of the cult. Even reading matter is skillfully controlled. Outsiders are considered to be on the wrong path to salvation and are in need of conversion; they are permeated with a materialistic culture and can only be dangerous to one's spiritual development. Non-members and their activities may even be exposed or subject to satanic influence.

This explains why members of several of the new cults appear like trapped in the group. Theoretically speaking, they have the option of leaving the group, but in reality they are hemmed in both psychologically and socially.

i) *Secrecy*

Most religious cults have developed some form of secrecy: secret initiation rites, secret doctrines, secret training sessions, and so forth. It is argued that the more advanced teachings of the cult can be understood only by initiates and hence are not to be passed on to curious bystanders.

This secrecy reminds one of that practised by early Christians. Between



the third and fifth centuries it was forbidden to divulge to non-Christians any information regarding the sacred rites or revealed truth. This restriction covered the sacraments and Sacred Scripture. Doors were closed at the inception of the rites and non-Christians were barred from attending.

Secrecy, religious or otherwise, has definite psychological and religious functions. It strengthens the individual in his belief that rites and beliefs have a certain divine quality about them. It heightens the feeling of elitism and exclusiveness and reinforces group identity and solidarity. But secrecy can be deceptive and is subject to suspicion. It can also be highly manipulative. Secret doctrines and practices are shrouded in an aura of mystery and become almost immune to both internal and external criticism. The initiate ends up locked in a religious system where theological discussion and differences of opinion are discouraged and even forbidden.

## 2. What should our attitude towards them be?

After the foregoing remarks, whose purpose was to indicate briefly the nature and characteristics of the new religious cults of today, it goes without saying that the Church and the theologian cannot remain indifferent before this growing phenomenon of our days. In his study of the cults published in *Theological Studies*, John A. Saliba lists six reasons why the Church should be concerned with the rise and influence of the new cults.<sup>(11)</sup> They can be briefly summarized as follows:

a) The cults are developing their own theologies, which at times run counter to the religious teachings and assumptions of the mainline Christian denominations. Thus, for example, one major tenet inculcated by these new religions is that religious knowledge which stems from one's experience is as important as knowledge which has been traditionally handed down, if not more.

b) The Christian Churches are already being influenced by the new religious movements. One has only to mention again Christian Zen and Christian Yoga in this regard. Through these spiritualities and practices Eastern Religions are having a real and perhaps lasting influence on Christian thought and religious trend.

c) The Christian Churches and the new religious cults share a number of religious practices, concerns and interests. Thus many people involved in the cults are in search of spiritual direction and guidance. Gurus tend to fulfil the role of teachers of the spiritual life. Besides, the main concerns of the new religious movements have been part of the theological preoccupations of the Christian churches: the place of the human person in the universe, the relation between the individual and God, the nature of religious commitment, the goal of life, the question of life after death. The Church has already provided satisfactory answers to these perennial

11. Saliba, *art. cit.*, pp. 471–475.

questions, but it cannot ignore altogether the alternative solutions many Christians are now exploring.

d) The cults are becoming a popular avenue for East-West contact. In the field of Christian relations with the great religions, the work of the World Council of Churches and of the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians in fostering dialogue has encouraged understanding between the many faiths of humankind. Endeavors of theologians in this field, however, have not reached the average Christian. The way in which Christians are acquiring an awareness of the presence and possible usefulness of Eastern thought is through the Eastern religious movements in our midst, an unconscious dialogue lacking guidance and depth.

e) The rise and growth of the new religious movements is not just an external phenomenon occurring outside the Christian context. It also has a strong internal base. The charismatic movement, for example, has roots both in Christian theology and practice and in the new religious consciousness. Many of the social and psychological forces which spurred the charismatic renewal into being are also responsible for the spread of the Eastern religious groups of today. Hence the Church cannot realistically view the new cults as an outside phenomenon with little or no impact on Christian life.

f) Finally, there are pastoral reasons why the Church cannot ignore the new cults. The success of the new religions challenges the effectiveness of the Christian ministry. Those who are considering joining one of the new groups, those who have given up their allegiance to them, and the parents of those who are committed to one of the new religions should all be the object of pastoral concern and action.

What should then be our attitude as Christians, as theologians, to the new cults? Three main possible attitudes can be distinguished in this regard.<sup>(12)</sup>

a) The first attitude is characterized by exclusivism: only my religion is right and conducive to salvation, every other religion or cult is false and ineffective as far as salvation in the spiritual sense is concerned. Many of the new religions themselves take this attitude. Such an approach, however, is not only fraught with spiritual pride, naivety, undue restriction on God's grace and absence of Christian love, but utterly un-Christian and certainly un-Catholic especially after Vatican II. Members of non-Christian religions can be saved if they acknowledge and honour God the way they know best, thanks to the Spirit of God who may be living in them.<sup>(13)</sup> In such religions as well there can be some salvific elements, which God can make use of to help their adherents on their path to Him.

b) A second attitude is to affirm that all religions, including these new cults, run parallel to one another and that they will eventually converge at

12. Cf. Saliba, *op. cit.*, pp. 476–8.

13. Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16; *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.; cf. also M. Eminyán, *The Mystery of Salvation* (Univ. of Malta: Malta, 1973, pp. 127–134; by the same author, *The Theology of Salvation* (Boston: St. Paul's Editions, 1960).

the end of time. Thus, all religions should maintain their own course and there should be no mutual opposition or proselytizing. The task of the Christian is to become a better Christian, and of the Hindu to become a better Hindu, etc. This method, as has been remarked, has some positive elements to recommend it and encourages peace and self-reform. It is, however, an unrealistic approach. Religions cannot live in isolation any longer. In a world torn apart by hatred and conflicts there is no room for self-conceit and isolation. Dialogue and cooperation are today more than ever indispensable, and all religions and their leaders should be the first to set an example in this regard. Vatican II itself has set the ball rolling in the sense of "wider ecumenism".<sup>(14)</sup>

c) The third attitude is one of inclusiveness. Other belief systems do contain elements of truth which can be interpreted as non-contradictory, and sometimes even as complementary, to one's own religious traditions. The advantage of this attitude is that it tolerates others, avoids condemnation and considers the possibility of entering into dialogue with other faiths. Like the first two attitudes, this approach presents certain serious problems: degenerating into a kind of religious "relativism", where truth becomes one thing for the Christian and quite another for the Hindu or the Buddhist. But it need not be so. Differences are not always contradictions. In spite of its flaws, this approach is more conducive to understanding than the exclusivist or parallel paths attitudes outlined above. It proposes a theologically sounder view of God's revelation and salvific will, and above all is in line with the teachings of Vatican II.<sup>(15)</sup>

## Conclusion

Depending on one's theological evaluation of the cults in general and of each one in particular, one cannot remain passive before the widespread diffusion of the new cults. Many people need to be enlightened in their regard, especially those who have returned from them, and in any case the many more who are being enticed to join them. When all is said and done, the new religious movements of today, rather than being a threat to Christianity, may very well provide an excellent opportunity for the Church to further understand her mission, to adapt and react more meaningfully to the changing needs of our age, and to renew herself in the spirit of the Gospel.

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14. Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, passim.

15. Cf. Eminyan, *The Mystery of Salvation*, pp. 112–119.